Press release

Met Office publishes the results of "Forecasting the Nation's Health" winter pilot

26 July 2001

Today, at the Treasury, the Met Office will announce the results of the winter pilot of its 'Forecasting the Nation's Health' programme, funded by the Department of Health.

The pilot forecast was trialed last winter to assess the viability of using real-time NHS, infectious disease data and Met Office weather forecasts to predict workloads in parts of the NHS.

Dr William Bird, the Met Office medical advisor leading the pilot explained: "'There is evidence to link an increase in workload for a major health system like the NHS, due to respiratory infections and trauma, with the weather. By linking a weather forecast with NHS data, we hope to be able to help health authorities to plan effectively for an increased workload."

The pilot programme was trialled in five areas: Plymouth, north Middlesex, Reading, Wolverhampton and Leeds. Conclusions are that the forecasts correctly predicted the general changes in workload for the Winter of 2000/1.

One hospital, for example was able to treat 150 more elective cases in December 2000 as a result of a forecast for milder weather. Another found the information from the pilot on strokes and respiratory illness extremely useful.

A survey of managers who received the forecast shows that 76% felt the majority of forecasts were accurate.

The pilot scheme is only the beginning and the Met Office, in collaboration with the Department of Health, has now received funding from a Treasury 'Invest to Save' grant to develop the forecast over the next two years. The improvement of the forecast model by November 2002 will significantly increase the accuracy of the forecasts and allow the NHS to plan ahead with increased confidence.

Dr Bird concluded: "The Met Office is diversifying and collaborating with other disciplines to look at the impact the environment has on our society. The new Health Forecast Unit has unparalleled operational back-up to provide a forecast 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The rapid turnaround of large streams of data to provide a forecast has been the main core of activity for the Met Office during its long history. The Met Office has the experience, resources and expertise to handle comfortably a major project such as Forecasting the Nation's Health."

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